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Man, monster or both? Jeep Swenson battles the Dynamic Duo as the mysterious Bane.

CALL HIM BANE

Bat-nemesis Jeep Swenson wrestles with his villainous destiny.

By MARC SHAPIRO

Jeep Swenson always leads into a boast by reminding anyone who'll listen that "I'm basically a modest guy." And so it's no surprise when Swenson, who plays the monster henchman Bane in *Batman & Robin*, gets humble about how his character comes across in the movie.

"I'm not trying to brag," says the wrestler-turned-actor with a distinct Texas drawl. "But I think you're going to see Bane stealing the whole show."

That *is* a bit of a stretch. But Swenson—a.k.a. "Jeep the Mercenary" in his professional wrestling days—measures in at 6' 4" and 400 pounds, so who's going to argue with him? He may not be the fabled 800-pound gorilla, but at half the size, he's close enough.

Besides, Bane, the mysterious henchman who does the bidding of Poison Ivy and Mr. Freeze, has acquired more importance in *Batman & Robin*'s post-production process. Though he was initially a mute monster, the filmmakers have decided that Bane should speak, so Swenson has been called back to loop some hastily written dialogue.

"Joel [Schumacher, director] just decided that he wanted to make Bane a stronger character than he came across in the film," says Swenson of his post-production duty. "Before, I didn't say anything. When this film comes out, I'll be saying a lot."

Swenson, whose action film credits include appearances in the films *No Holds Barred*, *The Big Brawl* and

Bulletproof, was one of more than 600 musclemen, wrestlers and other over-sized people who auditioned for the role of the man who, in the comics, broke Batman's back. Swenson recalls trying out early in the process, not hearing back and fearing "I had gotten lost in the shuffle."

Finally, the actor got a call informing him that he was being offered the role. He was invited to meet with Schumacher. Swenson laughs at the memory of the day he walked into the office. "There was literally a circus in the waiting room—this big black guy named Hymie, a 5' 2" bodybuilder and this 7' 4" giant. And there I was, this 6' 4", 400-pound guy."

The callback didn't last long. "I just walked into the room. Joel looked at me and realized that I looked *exactly* like Bane. I did not have to read or anything; Joel just said, 'This is what you'll be doing.'

"I've always been a fan of Adam West on the *Batman* TV series," says Swenson, who nevertheless claims not to be a comics buff. "But I knew absolutely nothing about the comics or, in particular, the real dark stuff in which Bane appears."

Swenson, who prides himself on his thorough research, began checking out Bane's background. Not long after getting the part, he found the info he needed in San Antonio, Texas. "This police officer came up to me one day and said, 'Man! You're the luckiest guy alive! You're playing the most popular character out there!' Then, he brought me a huge stack of comics and told me the whole history of Bane, how he breaks Batman's back and all that stuff."

Bane the Beast

Swenson had mixed feelings after reading the *Batman & Robin* script. "Originally, he seemed like just another character to me. It didn't seem as if I was going to have that much stuff to do." But as filming began, he discovered there was more to Bane than a mere monster in a mask.

"Bane is like a puppy dog. He's totally in love and engrossed with Poison Ivy [Uma Thurman]. Bane is a human who has been metamorphosized into this monster, and he isn't used to what's going on. He's somebody lost in limbo. His body has changed. Suddenly, he has gone from being this tiny little guy to being this monster. He doesn't understand it, but instinctively he likes it."

And the relationship with his mentor Poison Ivy? "It's simple. She points and I do–without question. He's more of a machine than a human being. He has no conscience. He doesn't think. When Ivy tells him to go out and create havoc, that's what he does."

The stunt coordinators decided to enhance the fighting scenes by employing Swenson's special wrestling expertise. "They built up a series of kicks and punches as well as doing things like pushing stuff aside, throwing things and going through walls and doors. They felt this was the kind of stuff I would be able to do in a believable way. You won't see me doing any wrestling holds or reverting to Jeep the Mercenary. Those kinds of things just wouldn't work in this movie."

Swenson is reluctant to talk in detail about his action sequences, but he does indicate that "I beat the hell out of Batman and Robin." He also offers that there is "a scene when we take over Poison Ivy's lair where I take on six guys at once." And finally he hints at Bane's demise in a showdown that pits him against Robin and Batgirl. "The fights are pretty well blocked out," he says. "The good guys are connecting with kicks and martial arts moves while I'm throwing stuff and knocking them over. Every once in a while, I would suggest choreography for the fights if I had an idea for something that might look better."

He regrets the fact that the actual conflict with Batman and Robin didn't involve much contact with George Clooney and Chris O'Donnell. "It was such a busy set that they would be off doing their elements of a fight, and then the stunt coordinators would come over to me and say, 'OK, we want you to throw a punch this way, then duck this way, then kick, then punch again.' It looks spectacular when the stuff is edited together."

Acknowledging that "Bane is a character created by costume, makeup and my physique," Swenson maintains that he nevertheless *is* acting. "It was absolutely a serious acting job. I didn't have any lines when we were filming this stuff—I had to act or *nobody* was going to get the point of this character. And because I was acting without

"Bane is a true monster."

Design & Layout: Mike Stewart

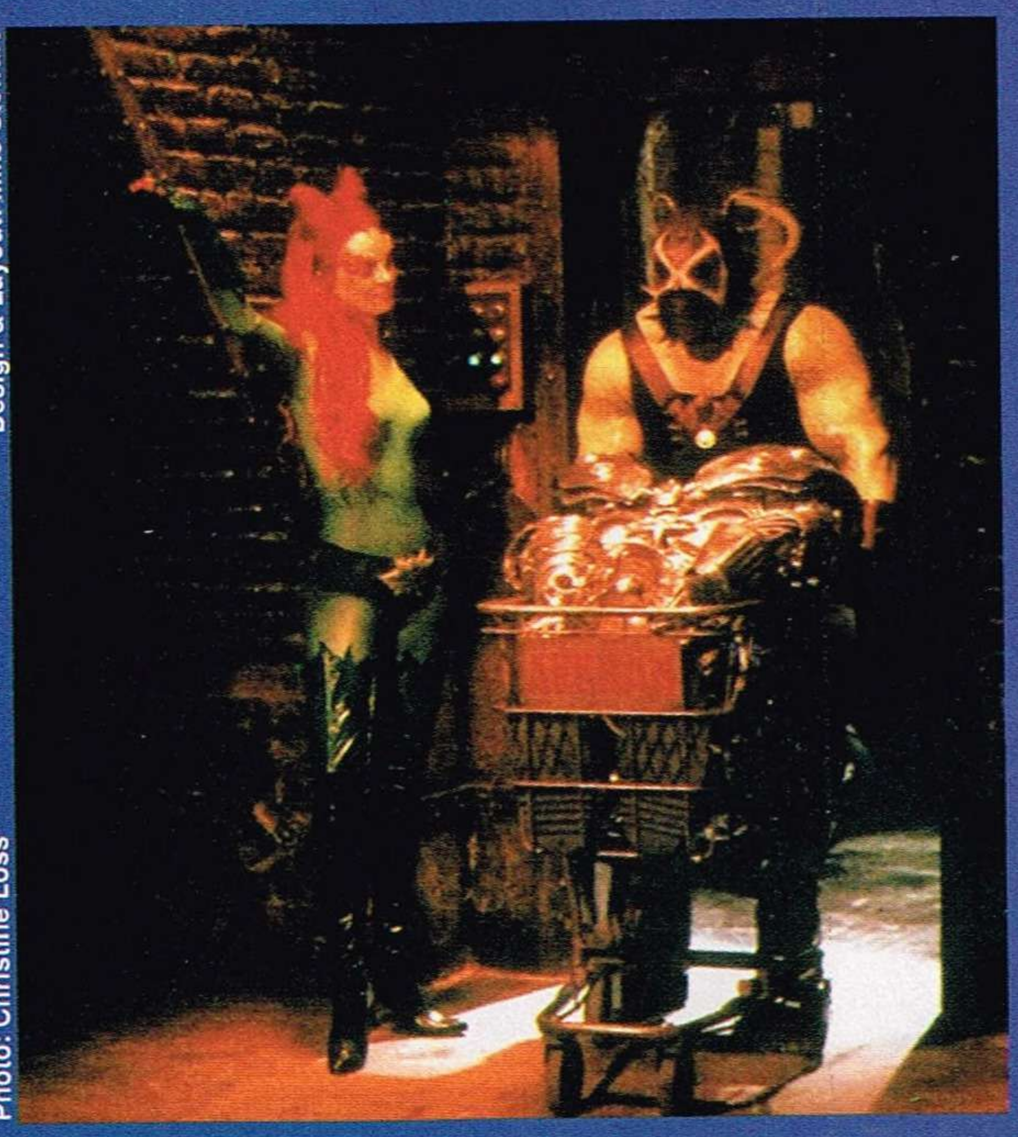

Photo: Christine Loss

This is a hulking henchman who *doesn't* think much. Bane does Poison Ivy's bidding without question.

The real Swenson is a former wrestler and the "biggest man in the world right now."

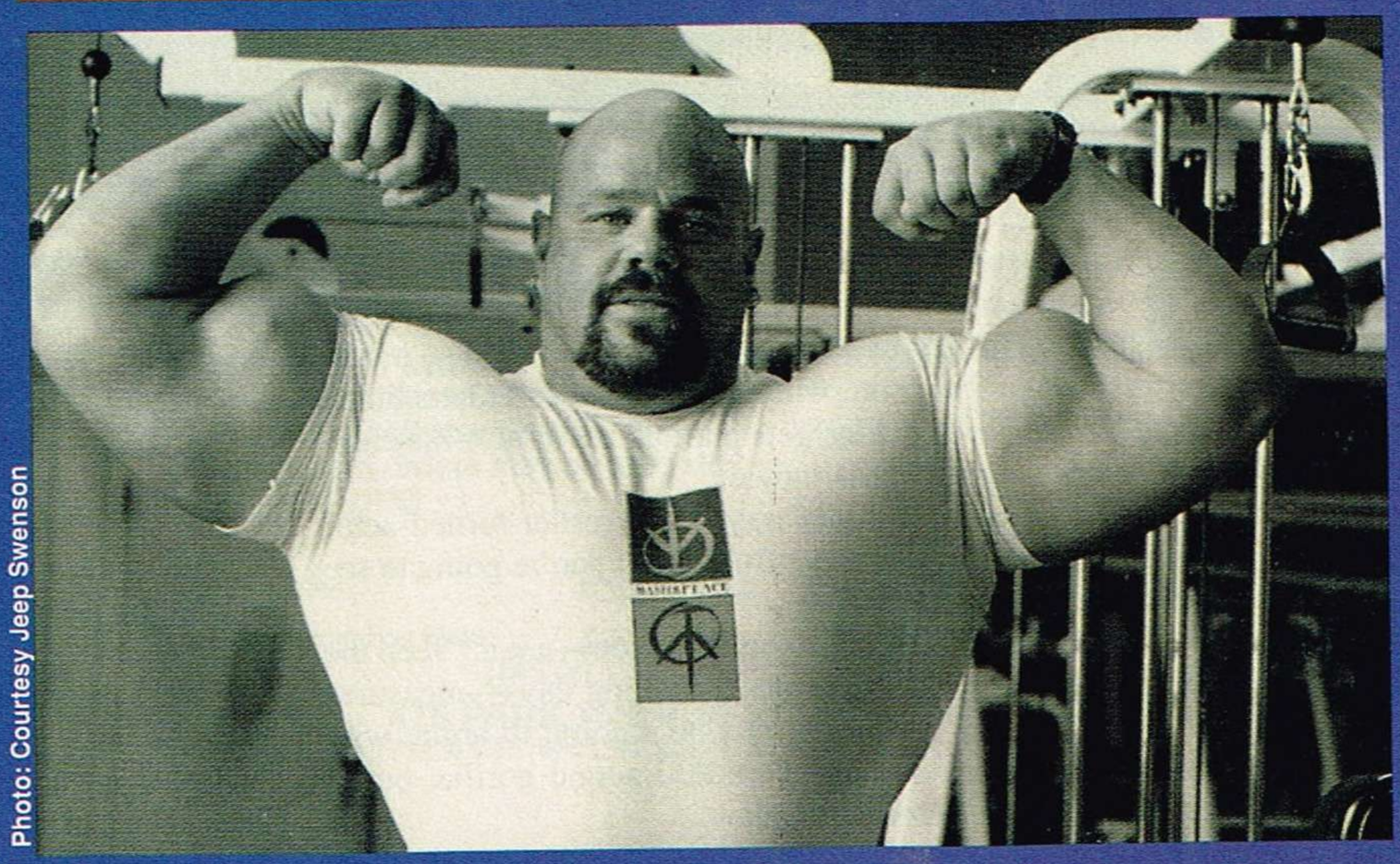

Photo: Courtesy Jeep Swenson

saying anything, it made going back and looping in dialogue later that much easier because even when I wasn't saying anything, it looked like I was portraying this character."

Comparing his character with previous Bat baddies, Swenson believes Bane marks a first for the film franchise. "All the other villains in Batman movies to this point have been cartoon characters, skinny, regular-sized people in makeup. Bane is something different. Bane is a true monster."

Bane the Brawler

Born and raised in San Antonio, Swenson originally flexed his muscles as a professional rodeo cowboy until he got hurt. "The doctors told me they could cut into my shoulder and maybe fix it. I decided to try and build up the muscles around my shoulder rather than face surgery and, in one year of sleeping, eating and training in the gym, I added 100 pounds of muscle. I was thinking about getting out of the rodeo business and buying a gym when my wife and a friend of mine talked me into becoming a professional wrestler."

Swenson admits to never wanting to wrestle. "I'm not sure *why* I did it. I guess I'm one of those guys who's willing to give anything a try just to see what happens." But over the years Swenson made a very good living at it, wrestling big names like Hulk Hogan, the Ultimate Warrior and Bruiser Brody. He balks at the question of wrestling vs. Batman movie-style fighting. "Oh boy! You're going to get me in trouble with the wrestling world. Let's just say that it's *all* entertainment. Wrestling is just a matter of knowing what we're doing so nobody gets hurt."

All Photos: Trademark & Copyright 1997 DC Comics/Courtesy Warner Bros.

Photo: Christine Loss

"Let's face it, you get kicked in the nuts, you're not going to be real happy," Swenson philosophizes. But that doesn't explain why Bane's so *mean*.

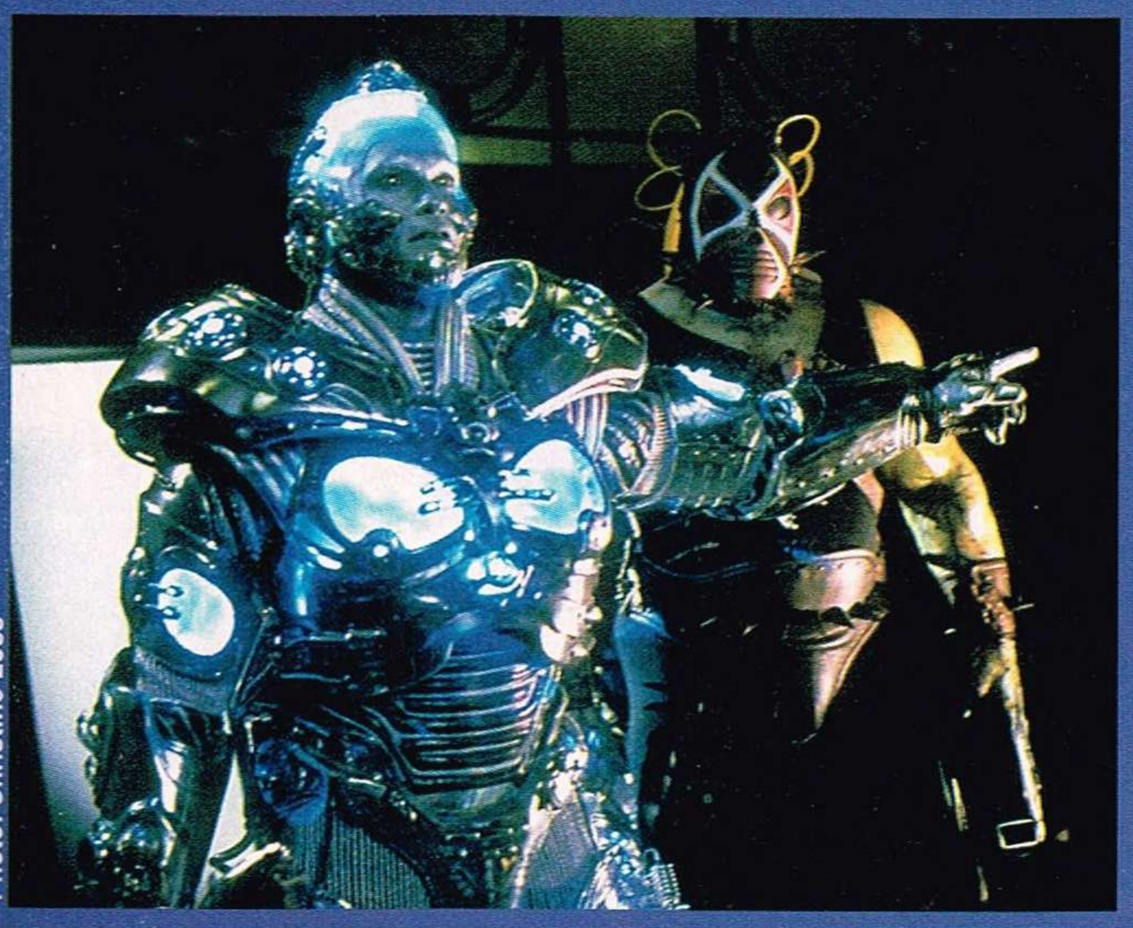

Photo: Christine Loss

Will Bane return? Swenson hints he might. Perhaps to break Batman's back?

When his previous movie roles are noted, Swenson has a candid reaction: "Oh God!" First at the mention of *No Holds Barred*, which featured Swenson's buddy Hogan. "It was *not* a fun experience. It was at a time when acting was not what I wanted to do. I bitched and griped the whole time. I was a real prima donna."

Originally, Swenson was supposed to play the fighting machine called Zeus. But two weeks before filming, the production hired Tiny (*The Fifth Element*) Lister for the role. Instead, Swenson played Lugwrench Perkins, who has a big punchup with Zeus in a steel mill.

"I took a real beating in that film," reflects Swenson. "Tiny was somebody who didn't know what he was doing during the fight, and I was getting hit for real a lot. At one point, he kicked me right in the crotch. Let's face it, you get kicked in the nuts, you're not going to be real happy. He was very apologetic and it was an accident. But I put my arm around Tiny and said, 'Listen, if you hit me again, I'm going to beat you up in front of all these people and embarrass the hell out of you.' "

Swenson had a big, one-day fight with Jackie Chan as "a Masked Marauder type" in *The Big Brawl*. "It was a pure set fight, lots of camera angles, lots of hits and misses. It was very bad. I was young and inexperienced and Chan was real arrogant. It was a job, but I wish I had never put that down on my résumé."

Playing opposite Damon Wayans and Adam Sandler in *Bulletproof* could have been, in Swenson's opinion, "the next *48 HRS*. But they cut my part down to almost nothing. I had some good scenes that showed me as an actor rather than just another tough guy."

Currently starring in *The Machinist*, Jeep Swenson knows he's perceived as a big guy who can throw a punch. But he claims he has a greater range and more ambitious goals. "I'm the biggest man in the world right now," he says. "There's nobody even close to me and, right now, that's opening many doors. I'm 36 years old. I figure I've got four or five years of being the biggest guy and to show people that I can also act. After I show people I'm for real, I can lose the weight and do other roles. I want to be known for being versatile. I feel I can act and will do nothing but get better at it."

Possibly with Bane? "I can't be too specific, but there has been talk," he admits. "You can expect to see Bane again in a larger capacity, and maybe not even in a Batman movie but possibly something of his own.

"If *Batman & Robin* comes out and Bane is a hit, you will see Bane again and again and again. If he's a flop, then you'll *never* see Bane again."